

# HR

WSD Personnel  
Washington State  
Employee  
Assistance  
Program

# FrontLineSupervisor

Olympia 360.753.3260

A newsletter from the Employee Assistance Program

Seattle 206.281.6315

Spokane 509.482.3686

Toll Free 877.313.4455

April 2009

<http://www.dop.wa.gov/eap>

■ **I see a fair amount of disrespect between coworkers on the job—things like backbiting, name-calling, gossip, and being inappropriate with jokes. I attribute it to stress and the economy; after all, employees need to vent a little, right?**

**Backbiting, name-calling, gossip and inappropriate jokes** are not acceptable workplace behaviors and must be addressed as job performance problems. It is true that the world and the workplace are currently filled with uncertainty and cutbacks related to the economy. These conditions fuel fear, anxiety and stress. Providing employees with appropriate stress management is important. The behaviors you describe, however, are unhealthy. Left unchecked, disrespectful interactions grow into a culture of personal conflict and simmering resentment that creates additional stress and eventually undermines the Agency's mission as well as productivity. An unhappy workforce may even result in the loss of your best employees. Respect is a value best promoted and practiced from the top down. As a manager, you're on the front line in this struggle, and although it can be daunting, you have the influence and control to deal with it.

■ **How can I be better at documentation? I've been criticized for not sticking to the facts when I write. For example, one of my employees demonstrates a continual pattern of conflict with others. In my documentation I said, "This employee has a conflict-ridden personality." That seems like a "fact" to me, but HR disagreed. What could I have done differently?**

**Good documentation is** clear, useful, and measurable. To make your documentation more effective, imagine you are in the bleachers of a stadium, observing the behavior of people down below. Simply record *who, what, when, where, and how*. Documentation that focuses on a psychological conclusion for behavior, such as saying your employee has a "conflict-ridden personality" is called "armchair diagnosis." This can create serious problems for the supervisor whose responsibility is to document observable behaviors rather than determine their cause. Employee assistance professionals are behavioral workplace specialists. During the EAP assessment, they will explore underlying issues impacting job performance problems. The EA professional will provide appropriate tools and resources to enable the employee to deal with personal problems. Supervisors and managers report that the desired result of improved job performance is frequently achieved after employees have been presented with clear documentation from their supervisor and have had subsequent contact with the EAP.

■ **I supervise several employees, and my manager told me it's my responsibility to make sure they stay motivated. I feel people must motivate themselves and that I can't do it for them. So, what is my role in the process? How do I play an influential part in motivating my employees?**

**It's been said that** motivating a large group of employees can be like herding

a group of cats. Each one is an individual, and therefore, you must look at employee motivation individually. Motivating the employees you supervise starts with getting to know them as individuals. This doesn't mean you probe them for personal information. Instead, it means spending time with them individually, getting to know them at work, and discovering their strengths in the general course of a workplace relationship. Through this process, your employees will perceive that you care about them. This is crucial to creating an atmosphere where motivation flourishes. Eventually, you will get a strong feel for how each employee can be best motivated. You can plan opportunities and rewards that fit unique aspects of each employee's motivational profile and personality makeup.

■ **Even after receiving training, I still find myself resistant to making referrals to the EAP. I feel like I'm guessing which employees need it and which ones do not. Is this unusual?**

**There are a few** challenging situations supervisors don't expect when learning to use an EAP referral effectively. For example, the EAP referral of an employee whose performance alternates for weeks or months between "satisfactory" and "unacceptable" might be delayed for years. Or, an employee a supervisor believes will feel ashamed or stigmatized by a referral to the EAP may grow more dysfunctional while a referral is delayed. Eventually, a crisis may ensue compelling the referral. Finally, supervisors may delay referral of employees they know well and think they can influence. The EAP referral may be delayed as lectures or persuasive coaching sessions by these supervisors create short-term improvements in performance that don't last. When you notice these patterns, it's time to consult with the EAP.

■ **Now that I'm a supervisor, I want to make a good impression on my employees. What will employees focus on most as they "size me up" over the next several months?**

**Your employees will** pay attention to what you say and do, but what they see will make the strongest impression. Many supervisors make the tactical error of focusing on impressing employees with their knowledge, hoping to gain respect. However, rule number one is to be a visible worker who puts in a full day and comes to work on time. If you demand excellence from employees, be sure to hold yourself to the same standards. Nothing will create resentment faster than being absent from pitching in to accomplish the work, especially if you are in the same location. If you are not a visible supervisor, communicate frequently with employees so they understand the goals and objectives you and your Agency are pursuing. Gaining respect works on the *law of attraction*. This "pull" strategy will work more successfully than a "push" strategy that demands or attempts to impress employees into recognizing you.

---

## NOTE from the EAP to Supervisors and Managers:

Washington State is facing tough economic times, including employee layoffs. This can be a very stressful process, and supervisors are often asked difficult questions by their employees. The WA State Department of Personnel has gathered together helpful resources and information about layoffs in one convenient location. These are available at: <http://www.dop.wa.gov/Managers/Layoff/default.htm>

---

## NOTES